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Eamon R. Carroll

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OUR LADY'S VIRGINITY "POST PARTUM"

"THROUGH the Virgin Mother of God virginity came into the world"—This truth was stated centuries ago by St Athanasius. The Holy Father has reminded the world of it in his recent encyclical *Sacra virginitas*.¹ The pope has placed in a single paragraph in his encyclical some of the most significant statements about Our Lady's virginity from the writings of the Fathers. In the words of St. Ambrose, "Let the life of Mary represent for you the very picture of virginity, the mirror of chastity's beauty and virtue's ideal. . . . She is the image of virginity."² The writers the supreme pontiff cites are the Fathers who especially defended the perpetual virginity of Mary in ancient times—Saints Ambrose, Athanasius and Jerome.

When we speak of the "perpetual virginity" of the Mother of God we mean her life-long virginity after the birth of Christ, the virginity *post partum*. Other papers of this convention have already been devoted to the themes of the absolute virginity of Our Lady both in conceiving and in giving birth to the Savior. Ours will consider the final aspect of virginity *post partum*, throughout the remainder of Mary's life after the birth of the Christ-Child.

As in the virginal conception and birth, the Church's defined doctrine on the virginity *post partum* points first of all to the corporal integrity of Mary. It means that after the birth of Christ Mary remained ever a virgin, that she never had conjugal relations. She had no other children besides Jesus; her

¹ *A.A.S.*, vol. 46 (1954), p. 188, the reference to St Athanasius is *De virginitate*, ed Th Lefort, *Le Muséon*, vol 42 (1929), p. 247.

² *A.A.S.*, vol 46 (1954), p. 188, St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib II, c 2, n 6, 15; *P.L.*, 16, 208, 210

first-born was her only-begotten son, the only fruit of her womb. Joined to this "virginity of body," or complete bodily integrity, was the "essential virginity of mind," or the virtue of virginity, meaning Our Lady's firm purpose of preserving perfect virginity, even to the exclusion of the legitimate use of marital rights. As Pope Pius XII explains, the virginity praised by Christ refers "to a free spiritual decision to embrace life-long celibacy and continence. To be really perfect, chastity must be perpetual."³ In addition Mary possessed what is called "virginity of sense" or "virginity of the heart" (*virginitas sensus seu animae*), meaning immunity from concupiscence.⁴

I

PERPETUAL VIRGINITY AND THE MAGISTERIUM

What has been the Church's teaching on Our Lady's perpetual virginity? From the second century the early western Creeds speak of the Mother of Jesus as the "Virgin" Mary, or simply as "the Virgin," and the same term is found in the early Fathers of East and West. Both the Creeds and the early patristic writers are concerned primarily with the virginal conception of Christ, with Mary's virginity *ante partum*. The Gospels leave no doubt about the virginal manner of Christ's

³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴ These are standard distinctions among theologians; e.g. cf. B. H. Merkelbach, O.P., *Mariologia* (Parisiis, 1939), pp. 216-263, on virginity *post partum*, pp. 250-263; G. Roschini, O.S.M., *Mariologia*, vol. 3 (Romae, 1948), pp. 239-278, on virginity *post partum*, pp. 261-268; Michael Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik: Gott der Erlöser*, vol. 2, 2nd part, 5th edition (München, 1955), pp. 167-181. Just as this article goes to press a copy of Michael Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik*, vol. 5: *Mariologie* (München, 1955) came to my hands; pp. 106-144 concern Mary's virginity, with many penetrating insights into the Fathers and the middle-age theologians.

conception, it is part of the rule of faith from the beginning, and explicitly so according to our earliest evidences⁵

The Gospels are explicit neither about the virginity *in partu* nor the perpetual virginity. As to Our Lady's virginity after the birth of the Christ-Child, we do not know how explicitly this was held in the Church in the first centuries. Virginal conception and virginal childbearing were so immediately concerned with Christ's coming into the world, with the mystery of God's becoming man, that the teaching Church gave first emphasis to these aspects of Mary's virginity. Her virginity *post partum*, the life-long gift of herself to her Son and her God by perfect integrity of body as well as complete dedication of soul, did not enter explicitly into the Creeds. As late as 370 St Basil would say "Only the virginity in the conception belongs to the mystery of the Incarnation" Yet Basil adds: "The friends of Christ refuse to admit that the Mother of God ever ceased to be a virgin"⁶

Problem of Early Church's Silence

Writing of St. Athanasius' use of the term "Mary ever-Virgin," Newman considered the reverence of the early Church toward the mystery of Mary: ". how little is said of her at all by Scripture or the Fathers up to the Council of Ephesus, A. D. 431. It would seem as if, till our Lord's glory called for it, it required an effort for the reverent devotion of the Church to speak much about her or to make her the subject of popular preaching; but, when by her manifestation a right faith in her Divine Son was to be secured, then the Church was to be guided

⁵ On the value of the Creeds cf J Quasten, *Patrology*, vol 1 (Westminster, Md), 1951, pp 23-27, A Janssens, *De Heerlijkheden van het Goddelijk Moederschap*, ed 2 (Brussel, 1939), pp 111 ff On the Gospels, cf C C Martindale, S J, *Christ's Virgin Birth and the Gospel of the Infancy* (London, 1948)

⁶ *Homilia in sanctam Christi generationem*; P G, 31, 1468

in a contrary course. It must be recollected that there was a *disciplina arcani* in the first centuries, and, if it was exercised, as far as might be, as regards the Holy Trinity and the Eucharist, so would it be as regards the Blessed Virgin."⁷

Newman's counsel is a good one for the present question. Our Lady's virginity in after life was not miraculous, as was the virginal conception and virginal childbearing. We might be tempted to think that the virginity *post partum*, since it was not in itself preternatural, might more readily be attested to from ancient times. The Scriptures are not explicit about the perpetual virginity, but we cannot conclude from this silence that the Christians in apostolic and sub-apostolic times did not know of Mary's perpetual virginity. The relatives and disciples of Christ, "eyewitnesses to the Word of life," were surely aware, for example, of the correct identity of those whom the Gospels call "the brethren." Explicit mention of the perpetual virginity was not made because it was an unchallenged fact, and also because apparently it formed no part of the primitive catechesis. The situation seems to parallel, to a lesser extent, the case of the Assumption, in which the facts of Mary's departure from the earth and that her body was venerated in no tomb must have been known at the time, and yet there is no reflection of this awareness for some centuries in the literature that has come down to us.

Objections from Scripture

The Gospels have been forced to yield more objections than confirmations for the truth of Mary's perpetual virginity. Objections based on expressions such as "the brethren of the Lord," "first-born," and on the terms used to describe the stages in the married life of Mary and Joseph, would be raised

⁷ J. H. Newman, *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians*, 4th ed. (London and New York, 1888), vol. 2, p. 208.

by Christian writers in the third and fourth centuries, and in spite of having been answered long ago, would recur to the present day. Defenders convinced of Mary's perpetual virginity quite apart from scriptural evidence would nonetheless scan the Scriptures to answer the objections and to bring out indirect indications of Mary's virginity *post partum*. For example, Our Lady's question to the angel of the Annunciation, "How shall this happen, since I do not know man?" (*Luke* 1:34) was interpreted as showing the intention of life-long virginity.⁸ And some at least of "the brethren," four of whom are named—James, Joseph, Jude and Simon—are in the Gospel account obviously children of someone who is not Mary, while the "brethren" generally seem to be older than Our Lord.

Even in sub-apostolic times, e.g., by St. Justin, Mary is called simply, as if by synonym, "the Virgin." Did the early Church also see in this title a permanent state of virginity? We do not know, but it seems most likely it did. So matters stood for some centuries; there is neither explicit affirmation nor explicit denial of the perpetual virginity until the third century. It is quite possible that this truth, known but never emphasized by Mary's contemporaries, was for many decades even very little reflected upon. For doubts and denials did arise in some parts of the Church in the third and fourth centuries, calling forth a defense of the truth, and finally decisions by the magisterium. And it is also important to remember that we are dealing not only with a historical fact of a purely natural order when we think of Our Lady's virginity. The perpetual virginity, although not itself a miracle, was a secret guarded from vulgar eyes, even as the virginity *ante partum* and the virginity *in partu* were protected in Mary's lifetime by her marriage to St. Joseph. More important, the perpetual

⁸ *Oratio in diem natalem Christi*; *PG*, 46, 1140-1141, a special convention paper by Father Neal Flanagan, O.S.M., treats *Our Lady's Vow of Virginity*; cf. also Schmaus, *Mariologie*, pp. 117-120.

virginity cannot be separated from the miracles of the conception and birth of Christ. The virginity *post partum* pertains to the mystery of complete virginal dedication to God; the Mother of Jesus was as much His handmaid after His birth, as at the Annunciation and at Bethlehem. Whatever degree of knowledge the first Christians may have had about Mary's virginity *post partum*, the perpetual virginity was a truth confided to the Church's care. It was a mystery, part of the full mystery of the Virgin. It was part of the primitive deposit of the faith and would be officially taught by the Church in its own good time.

Statements of the Magisterium

The first explicit pronouncement of the magisterium dealing directly with the virginity *post partum* was made at the Lateran Council, 649, under Pope St. Martin I:

If anyone does not in accord with the holy Fathers acknowledge the holy and ever virgin and immaculate Mary as really and truly the Mother of God, inasmuch as she, in the fullness of time, and without seed, conceived by the Holy Spirit the Word himself, who before all time was born of God the Father, and without loss of integrity brought him forth, and after his birth preserved her virginity inviolate, let him be condemned.⁹

The Lateran Council was not ecumenical, but its canon on Mary's virginity expressed the belief of both East and West, and embodied a true article of faith. In 681, the sixth Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople, accepted the Lateran canon without question. Later popes and councils reaffirmed and repeated the Lateran canon on the threefold virginity of

⁹ *D.B.*, no. 256; cf. Paul F. Palmer, S.J., *Mary in the Documents of the Church* (Westminster, Md., 1952), pp. 31-32.

Our Lady, among them, the profession of faith made to Leo III by Nicephorus, Patriarch of Constantinople, in 811.¹⁰ The constitution, *Cum quorundam*, of Paul IV, answered the errors of the Unitarians in 1555:

In a spirit of paternal severity we are anxious to admonish each and everyone who has heretofore asserted, taught or believed . . . that the same most Blessed Virgin Mary is not truly the Mother of God, or that she did not always retain the integrity of her virginity, that is, before birth, during birth, and continuously after birth. . . .¹¹

Although the virginity *post partum* cannot be spoken of as explicitly and officially taught by the magisterium until the Councils of the Lateran (649) and of Constantinople (681), there is no doubt that it was commonly believed in the Church at least from the end of the fourth century. Church history and patrology show us how correctly the perpetual virginity of Mary has been described as "the triumph of the fourth century."

Expressions of the Magisterium Before 649

The letter praising Anysius and his fellow bishops of Thessalonica for their defense of Our Lady's virginity *post partum* against Bonosus was long attributed to Pope St. Siricius. Many scholars now place it definitely among the writings of St. Ambrose, but the loyalty of the great bishop of Milan to the Roman see and his unquestioned orthodoxy make him to some extent a spokesman for the pontiff in this matter.¹²

¹⁰ *D.B.*, no. 324 a, note 3 "post partum virginem conservavit, virginitate illius secundum naturam nulla ex parte demutata aut labefactata."

¹¹ *D.B.*, no. 993.

¹² *D.B.*, no. 91; this is the *Epistola de causa Bonosi*, in *P.L.*, 16, 1176-1178, we shall speak further of it in discussing St. Ambrose, but note here that it is

By the turn of the fourth century the "symbol of Epiphanius" was in use as the eastern version of the Nicene Creed. It contains the phrase "and was made flesh, that is, perfectly born of the ever-virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit."¹³ The ever-virgin (*semper virgo*) would be repeated in many subsequent symbols of the faith.¹⁴

The triumph of Theotokos at the Council of Ephesus, 431, put beyond challenge that the Virgin was truly the Mother of God. At Chalcedon, twenty years later, the Church defended the true and full humanity of Christ against the errors of Eutyches. The Mother of Christ again shared in her Son's glory. The *Tome* of Pope St. Leo I, which was acclaimed and approved at Chalcedon, recognizes the permanence of Our Lady's virginity.

She brought him forth without the loss of virginity, even as she conceived him without its loss. . . . The Son of God, therefore, came down from his heavenly throne without relinquishing the glory of his Father, and entered this lower world by way of a new order and new mode of birth. . . . By way of a new mode of birth, insofar as virginity inviolate which knew not the desire of the flesh supplied the material of flesh.¹⁵

now generally held of Ambrosian authorship since the study by Ferdinand Cavallera, *La lettre sur l'évêque Bonose est-elle de saint Sirice ou de saint Ambroise?*, in *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* (Toulouse), vol. 21 (1920), pp. 141-147.

¹³ *DB*, no 13 "et incarnatus est, hoc est, ex Maria semper virgine per Spiritum Sanctum perfectus genitus . . .", the Greek word is *aciparthenou*.

¹⁴ E.g., in the dogmatic letter of Pope John II, *Olim quidem*, 534, *DB*, no 202.

¹⁵ *DB*, no 144, cf. on the importance of the *Tome*: Francis X. Murphy, CSSR, *Peter Speaks Through Leo* (Washington, D. C., 1952). On the aftermath of Chalcedon for the development of Mariology, cf. the articles of H. Weisweiler, SJ in *Scholastik*, vol. 28 (1953) *Das frühe Marienbild der Westkirche unter dem Einfluss des Dogmas von Chalcedon—Die verneigte Schau der Virgo-Mater Gloriosa*, pp. 321-360, and *Die verstärkte Einzeichnung des Zuges der zärtlich liebenden Mutter*, pp. 504-525.

This was the mind even of the dissidents who did not accept the authority of Chalcedon.¹⁶ A century before the Lateran Council of 649 an eastern ecumenical council had formulated an anathema in the same sense: "If anyone shall not confess that there are two nativities of the Word of God—one . . . from the Father . . . the other . . . from the holy glorious Mother of God and *ever Virgin Mary* . . . let such a one be anathema."¹⁷

II

WITNESS TO THE VIRGINITY "*post partum*" IN EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

Second and Third Centuries; Problem of Tertullian

In recent years the philologist, Hugo Koch, has sought to reconstruct the evolution of the dogma of Mary's virginity from what he considers its original historical truth through different mutations to the fixed fourth century form.¹⁸ For Koch it all began with Jesus being the eldest son of many children of Mary and Joseph. Then the idea of a virginal conception of Jesus was introduced. Next the perpetual virginity of Mary was thought up, and the brothers and sisters explained as being Joseph's children by a previous marriage.

¹⁶ G. Jouassard, *Marie à travers la patristique: maternité divine, virginité, sainteté*, in *Maria: Études sur la sainte Vierge*, éd. du Manoir, vol. 1 (Paris, 1949), p. 138; the entire article, pp. 69-157, has been most helpful.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139, note 15, cf. also *DB*, no. 214.

¹⁸ Hugo Koch, *Adhuc virgo. Mariens Jungfrauschaft und Ehe in der altkirchlichen Überlieferung bis zum Ende des 4. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen, 1929), and *Virgo Eva-Virgo Maria. Neue Untersuchungen über die Lehre von der Jungfrauschaft und der Ehe Mariens in der ältesten Kirche* (Berlin-Leipzig, 1937).

In the final form Joseph, too, becomes a virgin and the "brethren" are made into "cousins" Koch argues especially from the evidence of Tertullian. Tertullian said that the Mother of Jesus was the mother of other children, too; Christ was virginally conceived, but after His birth His Mother married Joseph and bore him children, thus presenting an example both to virgins and to married women

Koch contends that Tertullian took this teaching from Irenaeus, and that Irenaeus in turn must have been influenced by Justin, Theophilus or Melito, whose now-lost writings he had read. And thus he traces a denial of perpetual virginity back to sub-apostolic times Koch makes much of the Irenaeus texts, which are the well-known Eve-Mary comparisons, the *adhuc virgo* texts. Irenaeus compares the birth of Christ from Mary "who was as yet a virgin" to the fashioning of Adam "from untilled and as yet virgin soil." He contrasts the virginal obedience of Mary to the disobedience of Eve "while still a virgin." Koch's critics have pointed out that neither the word usage of Irenaeus, nor the terms of his comparisons (virgin Eve—virgin Mary; virgin earth—virgin Mary) go beyond the virginal conception of Jesus Moreover, Koch missed a main point in Irenaeus' theology by ignoring the central idea of *recirculatio*—the solution of man's separation from God, brought on by Adam's fall, by a recapitulation in Christ, the new Adam, Son of the Virgin Mary.¹⁹

¹⁹ For a summary of Irenaeus' ideas on *recirculatio*, cf. Walter J. Burghardt, S. J., *Mary in Western Patristic Thought*, in *Mariology*, ed. J. B. Carol, O. F. M., vol. 1 (Milwaukee, Wis., 1954), pp. 111-113. On the interpretation of *primogenitus Virginis* in St. Irenaeus and in St. Hippolytus, cf. G. Jouassard, "Le premier-né de la Vierge" chez Saint Irénée et Saint Hippolyte, in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 12 (1932), pp. 509-532 (on Irenaeus), and vol. 13 (1933), pp. 25-37 (on Hippolytus). Jouassard has also noted that it is very difficult to know what St. Irenaeus thought, or even if he gave any thought, relative to the virginity *in partu* and *post partum*; cf. G. Jouassard, *La Théologie Mariale de Saint Irénée*, in *L'Immaculée Conception in Congrès Marials Nationaux—VII^e Congrès-Lyon—1954* (Lyon, 1954), p. 276, note 13.

Other problems against the virginity *post partum* introduced by Koch will not be taken up here. Some, as the one relative to "the brethren of Jesus," are battles that have been fought over and over again from patristic times, the reader is referred to the discussions stimulated by Koch's books.²⁰

A contemporary of Tertullian was Hippolytus at Rome. He made use of the expression of Irenaeus "first-born of the Virgin," but he can be adduced as a witness neither for nor against the virginity *post partum*, as Koch attempted.²¹ Eusebius holds that the "brethren" were not other sons of Mary.²² But Bishop Victorinus of Pettau does not seem to have felt obliged to make clear that the "brethren" were not sons of Mary.²³

Origen

When is the perpetual virginity first affirmed by the Fathers? At the same time as Tertullian was denying both the virginity *in partu* and the virginity *post partum*—whether

²⁰ Koch's books provoked many careful reviews, the few indicated are not all of them by any means K. Adam, *Theologische Bemerkungen zu Hugo Kochs Schrift: Virgo Eva-Virgo Maria*, in *Theologische Quartalschrift*, vol. 119 (1938), pp. 171-189, O. Bardenhewer, *Zur Mariologie des hl. Irenäus*, in *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, vol. 55 (1931), pp. 600-604; B. Capelle, O.S.B. "Adhuc virgo" chez S. Irénée, in *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale*, vol. 2 (1930), pp. 388-395, J. Lebon, in *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*, vol. 34 (1938), pp. 336-345. The excellent article by E. Druwé, S.J., *De Eeuwige Maagdelijkheid na de Baring*, in *Verslagboek der Mariële Dagen te Tongerlo, 1933*, vol. 3, pp. 53-67, answers Koch on the basis of Druwé's personal research into St. Irenaeus.

²¹ Cf. Jouassard, *art. cit.*, in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 13 (1933), pp. 25-37.

²² P.G., 23, 737-740.

²³ The text of Victorinus is lost, St. Jerome claimed against Helvidius that Victorinus did not oppose the perpetual virginity, according to Jouassard, *Marie à travers la patristique*, p. 84, note 28, Victorinus' attitude at best seems to have been equivocal. In general, on "the brethren of the Lord" cf. J.-M. Vosté, O.P., *De conceptione virginali Iesu Christi* (Romae, 1933), pp. 111-129, also P. F. Ceuppens, O.P., *De Mariologia Biblica* (Taurini-Romae, 1948), pp. 192-201.

from polemic excess or because he thought he was really reflecting the views of the African Church we do not know—at the same time Origen in the East wrote, "No one whose mind on Mary is sound would claim that she had any child save Jesus" ²⁴ It was to be another century before so definite an expression would appear in the western writers. Origen is clear in behalf of the perpetual virginity of Mary Inspired by ascetic ideals, Origen looked more deeply into the mystery of Mary's virginity and saw her perpetual virginity as a necessary element in her holiness

For Origen the Mother of Jesus was the "first-fruits of virginity among women" He is indignant at the charge that Christ repudiated His Mother for marrying Joseph and having other children after His birth ²⁵ Origen is well aware of the apocryphal explanations of the "brethren"; he cites them without taking any position on their authenticity. "Some, basing themselves upon the tradition of the so-called *Gospel of Peter* or the *Book of James*, said that the brothers of Jesus were the sons of Joseph by a first wife to whom he had been married before being espoused to Mary." ²⁶ For his own part Origen offers theological reasons, not alone ascetic reasons, for the perpetual virginity:

"Those who speak in this manner [i.e., those who say the 'brethren' were sons of Joseph] wish to hold fast to her perpetual virginity; for this body, chosen to serve the Word of God who

²⁴ *Commentarius in Ioannem*, lib. 1, cap. 4, n. 6, in *G.C.S.*, Origenes, vol. 10, 8, in *P.G.*, 14, 32 On the Mariology of the Eastern Fathers, cf. Ignatius Ortiz de Urbina, S.J., *Die Marienkunde in der Patristik des Ostens*, in *Katholische Marienkunde*, 2. Auflage, ed. Paul Strater, S.J., vol. 1 (Paderborn, 1952), pp. 85-118 Volume 2 of the *Mariology* set edited by J. B. Carol, O.F.M., soon to be published, will contain a lengthy study of the Eastern Fathers by W. J. Burghardt, S.J.

²⁵ *Homilia 7 in Lucam*; in *G.C.S.*, vol. 35, 49; in *P.G.* 13, 1818

²⁶ *Commentarius in Matthaeum*, 10, 17, in *G.C.S.*, vol. 40, 21-22, in *P.G.*, 13, 876-877

had said: 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the most High shall overshadow thee,' should not have intercourse with man after the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and after the power of the most High had overshadowed her. In my opinion it was logical that the first flower of the life of purity should be Jesus among men and Mary among women, for it would have been unbecoming to attribute to anyone other than Mary the title of 'The First of the Virgins' " ²⁷

Origen does not, however, stigmatize opponents of the perpetual virginity as heretics; he calls the opposing opinion "senseless" rather than "heretical." Clement of Alexandria had preceded Origen in defending the virginity *post partum*.²⁸ Clement and Origen are witnesses at least to the belief of some of the Christian people of their own time and place.

Eastern Fathers After Origen

If the Christmas sermon attributed to St. Gregory the Wonderworker is really his, then he is another early eastern witness to Mary's perpetual virginity²⁹ The same may be said of a disputed text of Peter of Alexandria if authentic, then it is the earliest example we have of the Greek term, *aeipárthenos* (= ever-Virgin).³⁰

The Cappadocians, whose contribution to Mariology has been championed in recent years by George Soll, also bear witness to the perpetual virginity. A sermon attributed to St.

²⁷ *Ibid*, translation from Emil Neubert, S.M., *Mary in Doctrine* (Milwaukee, Wis, 1954), pp 185-186

²⁸ Cf Jouassard, *Marie à travers la patristique*, p 82, note 14.

²⁹ Cf Georg Soll, *Das Zeugnis der griechischen Väter zur heilsgeschichtlichen Sendung Mariens als Stellvertreterin der Menschheit*, in *Die heilsgeschichtliche Stellvertretung der Menschheit durch Maria*, ed Carl Feckes (Paderborn, 1954), p 86, in defense of Gregorian authorship, along with Loofs, Pitra; Jugie and Jouassard do not concede the authenticity

³⁰ *PG*, 18, 517, O de Urbina, *art cit*, p 99, accepts the text as authentic

Basil is a reply to an open attack on Mary's perpetual virginity preached by Eunomius, Arian bishop of Cyzicus. Basil draws a distinction between Our Lady's virginal role in the conception and birth of Christ and her virginity in later life, assigning the first to the very mystery of the Incarnation, yet saying of opponents of the perpetual virginity: "The friends of Christ refuse to admit that the Mother of God ever ceased to be a Virgin."³¹

St. Gregory of Nyssa sought to defend the perpetual virginity by Our Lady's words in *Luke* 1, 34: "How shall this happen, since I do not know man?" He interpreted Our Lady's words as expressing the intention of perpetual virginity, as a vow of virginity.³²

St. Gregory of Nazianzus uses a word in describing Our Lady's virginity, which may also mean her perpetual virginity.³³ It is possible that we owe to St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the teacher of exegesis so esteemed by Jerome, the now-common interpretation of the "brethren of the Lord."³⁴

Didymus of Alexandria calls Mary ever-Virgin (*aeipárthenos*) and wrote of her as follows: "neither did . . . Mary marry anyone nor did she ever become mother of another; but after childbearing she always remained an immaculate virgin. . . ." ³⁵

³¹ *Homilia in sanctam Christi generationem*, P G, 31, 1468, a brief discussion of the authorship is given by René Laurentin, *Court traité de théologie mariale* (Paris, 1953), pp 159-160. Both Soll and Jouassard hold that Basil wrote it.

³² *Oratio in diem natalem Christi*, P G., 46, 1140-1141, cf Laurentin, *op cit*, p 161; G Soll, *Die Mariologie der Kappadozier im Lichte der Dogmengeschichte*, in *Alma Socia Christi*, vol 5, fasc 1 (Romae, 1952), p 145; cf also note 8 above.

³³ Soll, *art cit*, p 144: the word is *apeirógamos*.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ *De Trinitate*, lib 3, cap 4, P G, 39, 832.

St. Athanasius

In 1929 Louis-Théodore Lefort discovered and identified seven Coptic fragments of the *Letter to Virgins* of St. Athanasius. There is a long description of Mary's virginal life which is frequently matched phrase for phrase and word for word in St. Ambrose's later work *De virginibus*.³⁶ Copt was the language of the Egyptian monks, and in this ascetic environment Athanasius had a most compatible audience for his discourse on virginity. Chenoute of Atripus, a later leader of Coptic monasticism, spoke of Athanasius as a man "who never has his fill of speaking about virginity." Through Lefort's investigations, eight important works of St. Athanasius relating to virginity and asceticism have become known. As far as Our Lady is concerned, the *Letter to Virgins* excels all the others.

St Athanasius in the *Letter to Virgins* cites "our father Alexander" as teaching virgins to model their conduct on Mary.³⁷ This Alexander was probably Athanasius' immediate predecessor at Alexandria. Lefort suggests that Athanasius may also be somewhat indebted for his teaching on Mary as model of virgins to the so-called Gnomes or Maxims of the Council of Nicea.³⁸ What is important is that fairly early in

³⁶ This treatment of St Athanasius and even more that on St Ambrose owe very much to the unpublished dissertation defended in 1954 at the University of Fribourg by Charles W Neumann, S.M., *The Virgin Mary in the Works of St Ambrose*. Neumann shows by parallel texts the dependence of Ambrose on Athanasius, pp 37-46, A Janssens does the same to a lesser extent in *Het Dogma en de Apocriefen*, vol 1 of *De Heilige Maagd en Moeder Gods Maria* (Brussel, 1930), pp 332-336. St Ambrose's use of St Athanasius is recognized in *Sacra virginitas*, *AAS*, vol 46 (1954), p 188. Lefort's original article appeared in 1929 *S Athanasie: Sur la virginité*, in *Le Muséon*, vol 42 (1929), pp 197-275, he followed it up with other articles on the same subject.

³⁷ Neumann, *op cit*, p 18.

³⁸ Neumann, *op cit*, pp 19 ff.

the fourth century Mary was a recognized model of virgins. In the *Letter to Virgins* St Athanasius wrote:

"May the life of Mary, who brought forth God, be to all of you the image according to which each will conform her virginity. . . . Mary was a pure virgin, possessed of a harmonious state of soul. Behold the image of virginity—such was Mary. Let whoever desires to be a virgin consider her, for it is on this account that the Word chose to take from her this flesh and to become man for us . . . Oh how many virgins will Mary greet! How she will take them to herself and lead them to the feet of the Lord! What joy among the angels in seeing the image of their purity in the body of the virgins! How the Lord will present them to his Father on seeing them and will say: All these were and are as Mary to me."³⁹

St. Epiphanius

To St Epiphanius we are indebted for more than the term "ever-Virgin" which entered the eastern form of the Nicene Creed through him. In his monumental *Panarion*, written 372-377, Epiphanius censures the slanderous opinion of the Antidicomarianites (adversaries of Mary). They interpreted the text of *John* 19, 27, "And from that hour the disciple took her into his home," as meaning marriage, and claimed also that Mary had children by Joseph. *John* 19, 27 was also twisted in their own defense by the "agapetes"—the "virgines subintroductae," an ascetic abuse that still troubled the Church as late as the time of Epiphanius and Ambrose. This misinterpretation made apologists slow to appeal to *John* 19, 26-27 in support of Mary's perpetual virginity. Although the term "heresy" was then more elastic than it later became, Epiphanius struck

³⁹ Lefort, *S. Athanase. Sur la virginité*, in *Le Muséon*, vol. 42 (1929), pp 244-249

a strong blow for Mary's perpetual virginity by placing the Antidicomarianites in his list of heresies, speaking of this "unheard-of insanity and preposterous novelty."⁴⁰

From the end of the fourth century there is no difficulty about multiplying patristic testimonies to the perpetual virginity of Mary. Some of the eastern Fathers are St. John Chrysostom,⁴¹ St. Ephraem,⁴² Proclus of Constantinople,⁴³ Cyril of Alexandria.⁴⁴ Even the dissidents held this truth⁴⁵

Western Writers — St. Hilary of Poitiers

Expression of belief in Mary's perpetual virginity came more slowly in the West than in the East. We have considered above the denial by Tertullian. Even at the beginning of the fourth century Mary's perpetual virginity is not prominent in the literature that has come down to us, although one lone singer from Autun, France, lifted his voice in praise of Mary's perpetual virginity.⁴⁶

With St. Hilary of Poitiers the West began to teach and preach the perpetual virginity in a definite fashion. Before 356 Hilary published a *Commentary on Matthew* in which he spoke of adversaries of the virginity *post partum* as "irreligious individuals, utterly divorced from scriptural teaching."⁴⁷ He

⁴⁰ *Panarion*, haer. 78, P.G., 42, 706, in G.C.S., vol. 37

⁴¹ In *Matthaeum homilia* 5, nn. 2-3; P.G., 57, 56-59

⁴² St. Ephraem's affirmation of the virginity *post partum* is in the *Diatesseron*, in the Latin translation of Aucher-Moesinger (Venice, 1876), pp. 23-26; for a discussion of its genuinity cf. Jouassard, *Marie à travers la patristique*, p. 88, note 9

⁴³ *Oratio 2, de Incarnatione Domini*; P.G., 65, 700; cf. Laurentin, *op. cit.*, p. 164

⁴⁴ *Adversus nolentes confiteri s. Virginem esse Deiparam*; in P.G., 76, 200

⁴⁵ Cf. M. Gordillo, S.I., *Mariologia Orientalis* (Romae, 1954), pp. 168-184

⁴⁶ *Laudes Domini*, nn. 105-108, P.L., 19, 384, cf. W. Burghardt, S.J., *Mary in Western Patristic Thought*, in *Mariology*, ed. J. B. Carol, O.F.M., vol. 1, p. 80, note 127

⁴⁷ *Commentarius in Matthaeum*, cap. 1, n. 3-4; P.L., 9, 21.

identifies the "brethren" as Joseph's children by a former marriage, and sees in Christ's confiding His Mother to John's care an argument that Jesus was her only child. His arguments are founded above all on the quality of Mother of the Savior which he sees in Mary. Shortly after Hilary, Ambrosiaster explains the "brethren" in the same way, i.e., as Joseph's children.⁴⁸

The force of the words of Bishop St. Zeno is beyond question. His diocese was Verona in north Italy where the spread of asceticism favored virginity. St. Zeno wrote: "O marvelous mystery! Mary conceived as a virgin incorrupt; after conception she gave birth as a virgin; after childbirth she remained a virgin."⁴⁹ "She was a virgin after marriage, a virgin after conceiving, a virgin after childbearing. For if there were anything better than virginity, the Son of God would have given it to His Mother, to whom He gave the honor of divine virginity."⁵⁰

The Great Decade, 383-392

In the single ten-year period, 383-392, the Church in the West was presented with a picture of Mary model of virginity, virgin in the conception and birth of Christ, equally given to God alone and perpetually virgin through all her later life. The great names are Jerome and Ambrose. The writings of both Fathers are so bound up with the events of the time that they must be placed in their historical context. The Christian spirit of the age was one of asceticism. Eastern ascetic influences were making themselves felt also in the West; St. Athanasius, for example, had traveled in the West, and translations of his works were eagerly circulated. Some have charged that Mary's perpetual virginity was "invented" as a spur to asceti-

⁴⁸ *In epistol. Pauli ad Galatas*; *P.L.*, 17, 364.

⁴⁹ *Tractatus*, lib. 2, tr. 8, 2; *P.L.*, 11, 414-415.

⁵⁰ *Tractatus*, lib. 1, tr. 5, 3; *P.L.*, 11, 303.

cism, but this is to ignore all previous tradition. Asceticism, e.g., the vocation of consecrated virginity, did play a part in the increased awareness of Mary's life-long virginity, but it did not play the leading role. Ascetic practices and preaching played the part of agents, presenting to the teaching Church an adequate formula to state its doctrine precisely⁵¹ The *Ecclesia docens*, the teaching Church, made the final decision

Helvidius and St. Jerome

The attack on Mary's virginity, especially on the virginity *post partum*, was motivated by practical rather than dogmatic reasons. In reaction to the ascetic emphasis on virginity, Helvidius proposed Mary as an example of both the state of virginity and the wedded state: virgin in the conception of Jesus, mother of a large family in later life.

Helvidius' arguments were spread in Rome, and disturbed even the ascetics. Representatives of the hierarchy at Rome seem to have adopted a "laissez-faire" attitude toward the dispute. There was still at Rome a certain suspicion that the ascetics were really Priscillianists⁵² St. Jerome, recently arrived at Rome in the company of St. Epiphanius, answered Helvidius in the mordant pamphlet, *Adversus Helvidium*, 383.

Jerome's thesis is the superiority of virginity to marriage, and he summons both Scripture and tradition to prove that Mary had not even so much as thought of marital relations. "You say that Mary did not continue a virgin. I claim still more, that Joseph himself on account of Mary was a virgin, so that from a virgin wedlock a virgin Son might be born."⁵³

⁵¹ Cf. O. Faller, *De priorum saeculorum silentio circa Assumptionem B. Mariae Virginis* (Romae, 1946), pp. 74-75.

⁵² Cf. Jouassard, *Marie à travers la patristique*, p. 106, on background history; cf. also J.-R. Palanque, *Les métropoles ecclésiastiques à la fin du IV^e siècle*, in *Histoire de l'Église*, éd. Flèche et Martin, vol. 3 (Paris, 1950), pp. 476 ff.

⁵³ *Adversus Helvidium*; P.L., 23, 209 ff.

Jerome answers one by one the scriptural difficulties: "before they came together" (*Matt.* 1, 18), Joseph's "wife" (*Matt.* 1, 24), "he did not know her till she had brought forth" (*Matt.* 1, 25), "first-born" (*Matt.* 1, 25). He identifies the "brethren" as children of a sister of Mary's "brethren in point of kinship, not by nature." The blasphemous opinion of Helvidius is not supported by tradition: "Might I not array against you the whole series of ancient writers? Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and many other apostolic and eloquent men, who against Ebion, Theodotus of Byzantium, and Valentinus, held these same views, and wrote volumes replete with wisdom. If you had ever read what they wrote, you would be a wiser man. . . ." ⁵⁴

Jovinian and St. Ambrose

Little more was heard from Helvidius after Jerome's crushing rebuttal. At the elevation of Pope St. Siricius, St. Jerome returned to the East. The enemies of asceticism formed their ranks again under Jovinian, an ex-monk. Jovinian denied Our Lady's virginity in childbirth, and, like Helvidius, equated marriage and virginity. Pope St. Siricius had his clergy examine and condemn Jovinian's propositions and excommunicate him. When Jovinian fled to Milan the pope sent to Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, a report on the Roman synod ⁵⁵ It was Jovinian's ruse to accuse his opponents of Manichaeism, so as to invoke against them the civil laws; he charged the ascetics with teaching that marriage was evil. By a clever counter-stroke, Ambrose had Jovinian and his followers expelled from Milan.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ The Pope's letter, *Optarem semper*, Ep. 7, 3, *P.L.*, 13, 1171, is dated by Neumann 392, the traditional date (Neumann, *op cit*, p. 148), although dates ranging from 389 to 393 have been suggested. Neumann explores thoroughly the problem of dating the relevant documents in this and other controversies about the virginity of Mary in which Ambrose took part.

precisely on the charge of Manichaeism. Ambrose's argument was: if, as Jovinian says, Christ did not come conceived and born of a virgin according to the prophecy of *Isaias* 7, 14, then He did not come at all, nor ever take flesh, hence He would be indeed a phantasm, and that is the heresy of the Manichaeans, who deny the reality of Christ's flesh.

By his letter *Recognovimus*, Ambrose reported to the pope about the synod held at Milan and the action taken against Jovinian. The letter is notable for its defense of the virginity *in partu*, and also for its appeal to the Apostles' Creed "which the Roman Church ever guards and keeps inviolate."⁵⁶

St. Ambrose and the Bonosus Case

The case of Bonosus called forth St. Ambrose's greatest defense of the perpetual virginity of Mary. Bonosus was an Illyrian bishop who preached openly that Mary had other children. Ambrose rightly feared that the denial of the perpetual virginity would lead also to the denial of the virginal conception and birth, and eventually to a denial of Christ's divinity. It does not appear that Bonosus himself was guilty of the Christological error into which his followers afterwards fell—they were Photinians, denying any but an adoptive divine filiation of Christ.⁵⁷

During the winter of 391-392 Ambrose presided at the Council of Capua by request of Pope Siricius. The main business of the Council was the Meletian schism, but Bonosus' denial of the perpetual virginity was also on the agenda. The Council referred the problem to a regional synod to be held

⁵⁶ *Recognovimus*, Ep 42, *PL*, 16, 1124-1129, also to be found in Migne among the works of Siricius, as Ep 8, *PL*, 13, 1172 ff. Ambrose's teaching on the virginity of Mary is studied also in Josef Huhn, *Das Geheimnis der Jungfrau-Mutter Maria nach dem Kirchenvater Ambrosius* (Wurzburg, 1954), especially pp 191-237.

⁵⁷ Cf. Neumann, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

under Anysius, Bishop of Thessalonica. Seemingly. Bonosus was excluded from his see at a first meeting held in Thessalonica. This was done as a first step: the council does not seem to have definitely condemned Bonosus as in doctrinal error. Bonosus made an appeal to Ambrose at Milan, it is likely he was hoping to exploit the traditional Rome-Milan rivalry, because Thessalonica was a vicariate of Rome. Ambrose sent Bonosus a fairly mild reply, but one containing small comfort, for he advised him to submit the matter to the judges appointed—the council of Bishops.⁵⁸

At the same time the bishops wrote from Illyria asking Ambrose's advice. The *Epistola de causa Bonosi* was his reply to Anysius and his fellow Macedonian bishops. For centuries it was thought to be a letter of Pope St. Siricius, but scholars now favor an Ambrosian authorship. Ambrose disclaims competence in the dispute, definitely refers the matter back to his inquirers, and urges them to go on record with a condemnation of the errors of Bonosus. He writes in the name of the synod of Milan, speaking of himself in the third person.⁵⁹ Ambrose takes the occasion to discuss the point at issue, and to suggest a few lines of defense:

"You had good reason to be horrified at the thought that another birth might issue from the same virginal womb from which Christ was born according to the flesh. For the Lord Jesus would never have chosen to be born of a virgin if He had ever judged that she would be so incontinent as to contaminate with the seed of human intercourse the birthplace of the Lord's body, that court of the Eternal King. To assert such a view is to do nothing less than to accept as a basis that Jewish falsehood which holds that He could not have been born of a virgin. Once the weight

⁵⁸ Ambrose's answer to Bonosus is known only from his own allusion to it in the *Epistola de causa Bonosi* sent to Anysius, *P.L.*, 16, 1173.

⁵⁹ Cf. note 12 above.

of episcopal authority is gained for the view that Mary gave issue to many children, they will strive with even greater zeal to attack the truth of faith."⁶⁰

In Ambrose's opinion, Joseph was still alive at the death of Christ, and he here argues that Christ would not have entrusted His Mother to John on Calvary, had she ever made use of her marital rights, for that would have been to countenance divorce.

Ambrose was anxious to see Bonosus' errors juridically adjudged and officially condemned, but we do not know how soon the Illyrian bishops acted on this advice. St. Ambrose returned to the attack in real earnest with his *De institutione virginis*, his final word on the Bonosus case. The refutation of Bonosus forms part of a sermon delivered at the veiling of the virgin, Ambrosia, daughter of the bishop's friend Eusebius, though the polemic may have been inserted after the occasion.⁶¹

Ambrose takes the scriptural difficulties in order, those from the nativity accounts, the use of the word "woman" at Cana, and St. Paul's "born of a woman" (*Gal.* 4, 4). The problem of the "brethren of the Lord," treated at such length by Jerome in *Adversus Helvidium*, is differently solved by Ambrose. He indicates various possible meanings for the term "brethren" but inclines to the opinion that the "brethren of the Lord" were probably sons of Joseph by a former marriage. In explaining the sense of "till she brought forth" (*Matt* 1, 25) (*donec peperit*), he uses some of Jerome's examples from the Old Testament to show that "till" does not necessarily mean

⁶⁰ *Epistola de causa Bonosi*; *P.L.*, 16, 1172 ff, this letter occurs among the works of Siricius as *Ep. 9, Ad Anysium Thessalonicensem aliosque Illyrici episcopos*; *P.L.*, 13, 1176-1178, cf *D.B.*, no 91

⁶¹ *De institutione virginis*, *P.L.*, 16, 305-334, especially 313-320. Its date is disputed, Neumann, *op. cit.*, p. 243 ff, holds it must have been later than Easter, 392, perhaps as late as Easter, 393

the subsequent realization of the action it governs. It is instructive to note that in an earlier period of his writing, in 378, Ambrose explained the use of "until" in the account of the raven from Noah's ark (*Gen* 8, 7) by appealing to its use in the New Testament in *Matt.* 1, 25, and to the accepted truth of Mary's perpetual virginity.⁶²

Then Ambrose passes to his positive arguments for Mary's perpetual virginity. Christ chose for Himself a virginal mother; nothing can surpass the divine maternity and Mary's perpetual virginity is a necessary consequence of her unique dignity.⁶³ The Virgin Mary is Christ's choice as a model for virgins.⁶⁴ Mary distributes the grace of virginity to others. She was the teacher from whom St. John learned the divine mysteries he describes in his Gospel, including the mystery of Mary's own virginity.⁶⁵

Her Son in His filial love has reserved for His Mother the reward of virgins.⁶⁶ Our Lady was aware of her own dignity, and St. Joseph, the just man, respected that dignity.⁶⁷ Ambrose's interpretation of the Calvary scene, a topic he often treated, shows not only the filial love of Christ, but the heroic courage of His Mother, a constancy that rules out anything less than complete fidelity in virginity.⁶⁸

What is the "mystery" of Mary's virginity so sublime that its revelation was reserved to the virginal John? Ambrose does not say explicitly, but Father Neumann suggests two solu-

⁶² *De Noe et arca* 63, in *C.S.E.L.*, 32, 458, in *P.L.*, 14, 391, cf. Huhn, *op cit*, p 199, note 30

⁶³ *De institutione virginis*, *P.L.*, 16, 331

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 330-331 "Quid enim vel ad imitanda virginum studia confirmandamque virtutem vel ad concelebrandam virginis gloriā plus conferre potuisti, quam ut Deus ex virgine nasceretur?"

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 319.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 317

⁶⁷ *Ibid*

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 318.

tions: (1) Mary's virginal state was a secret protected from public knowledge by her marriage to Joseph, so that it was a mystery for her to be confided to John's care while Joseph was still alive; (2) the mystery may be the virginity of mind and heart joined to Mary's corporal integrity, and no one but John knew how perfect Mary's virginity was. For in speaking of John's fittingness to receive the Virgin Mary in his *Exhortatio virginitalis* St. Ambrose describes Mary. "Mary is the vine blossom-laden, for her virginity is pure and directed to God freely and fully, unmarred by distractions of the cares of this world."⁶⁹

In the West as in the East it is not difficult to garner many patristic testimonies to Mary's virginity after St. Ambrose. Some of the western names are: St. Augustine,⁷⁰ St. Peter Chrysologus,⁷¹ St. Leo the Great.⁷²

III

THEOLOGICAL REASONS FOR THE VIRGINITY "post partum"

The ancient writers, inspired by ascetic considerations, reflected more profoundly on the role and dignity of the virgin Mother of God. They were the first to offer theological reasons why Mary always remained a virgin. Origen considered Mary's perpetual virginity a necessary part of the true picture of her holiness. St. Athanasius advanced the opinion that Mary may have been the model St. Paul had in mind when

⁶⁹ *Exhortatio virginitalis*; *P.L.*, 16, 345. "Ipsa (Maria) est virga germinans florem, quia pura et ad Dominum libero corde directa virginitas, quae nullis in hoc saeculo curarum anfractibus reflectitur"; cf. Neumann, *op. cit.*, pp. 201 ff.

⁷⁰ *Serm.* 190, n. 2; *P.L.*, 38, 1008, *Serm.* 196, n. 1; *P.L.*, 38, 1019.

⁷¹ *Serm.* 98; *P.L.*, 52, 521.

⁷² *Serm.* 22, cap. 2, *P.L.*, 54, 195. "... divina potestate subnixum est, quod virgo conceperit, quod virgo pepererit, et virgo permanserit." Cf. note 15 above on the *Tome* of Pope St. Leo.

he counseled virginity to the Corinthians.⁷³ For St. Hilary of Poitiers in the West, Mary is ever-Virgin because she is Mother of the Savior. And Bishop Zeno of Verona said: "If there were anything better than virginity, then the Son of God would have given it to His Mother."

For St. Jerome, ". . . virginity means dedication through Mary and through Christ."⁷⁴ According to St. Ambrose, "the Lord Jesus would never have chosen to be born of a virgin if He had ever judged that she would be so incontinent as to contaminate with the seed of human intercourse the birthplace of the Lord's body." The positive reasons of St. Ambrose are theological reasons: Mary's perpetual virginity is a necessary consequence of her unique dignity as Mother of God. Christ chose His Mother to be a model to virgins, He made her the "mistress of virginity."⁷⁵

The Fathers in their reflections on Mary's virginity went beyond the immediate scriptural testimony of the virginal conception of Christ. They knew the Scriptures contain the revelation of God's plan of salvation, and that the Incarnation—God's being made man in time of a woman—is central in that plan. They saw from the Scriptures what true virginity is. As they considered Mary's dedication of herself to God, it became clear to them that she was chosen because of her complete gift, because of her virginity. It was unthinkable that after the birth of Christ His Mother could have been untrue to God and to herself, and that Christ would not have protected even her corporal virginity. And so in the tradition of the Church the virginity of Mary is not alone, and not first of all, a negative

⁷³ Lefort, *S. Athanase. Sur la virginité*, in *Le Muséon*, vol 42 (1929), p 247, cf. Neumann, *op cit*, p. 48

⁷⁴ *Epist* 22, n 18, *P.L.*, 22, 405, this is quoted in *Sacra virginitas*, in *A.A.S.*, vol 46 (1954), p 189 and note 123

⁷⁵ *De institutione virginis*; *P.L.*, 16, 320 "virginitatis magistra", cf *Sacra virginitas*, in *A.A.S.*, vol 46 (1954), p. 188 and note 113.

thing---mere physical integrity; it is something meritorious and at the same time a grace, a divine gift. It is holiness in body and soul, a holiness of soul which extends also to the body.

The pressure of controversy in the fourth century called for the express formulation of the Church's latent belief in the perpetual virginity. Before that time it lay hidden in the belief in Mary's absolute holiness and in her perfect absorption in the example and redemptive work of her Son. It was bound up with the full awareness of the teaching of Christ and St. Paul on the excellence of the virginal state. In times past and present the denial of the privilege of Mary's perpetual virginity is always accompanied by an attack on this Christian ideal of holiness.⁷⁶

St. Thomas' Reasons

St Thomas' well-known reasons for the perpetual virginity of Our Lady follow patristic thought. St. Thomas offers four reasons: (1) on the part of Christ; (2) on the part of the Holy Spirit; (3) on Mary's part; (4) on St Joseph's part.⁷⁷

(1) As to Christ: for Our Lady to have had other children would have been derogatory to His perfection, for as He is in His divine nature the only-begotten of the Father, in all things His perfect Son, so it was fitting that He should be the only-begotten of His Mother, as her perfect offspring.

(2) The virginal womb of Mary was the sacred place (*sacrarium*) in which the Holy Spirit formed the body of Christ, "wherefore it was unfitting that it should be desecrated by intercourse"

⁷⁶ Cf Druwe, *De Eeuwige Maagdelijkheid na de Baring*, in *Verslagboek der Mariële Dagen te Tongerlo*, 1933, vol 3, pp 66-67.

⁷⁷ *Summa theologica*, III, q 28, a 3, cf Thomas U Mullaney, O P, *Mary, Ever-Virgin*, in *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, vol 131 (1954), pp 159-167, 256-267, pp 261 ff for the theological reasons for perpetual virginity

(3) Our Lady herself "would seem most ungrateful if she were not content with so great a Son, and if she should freely lose that virginity which had been miraculously preserved."

(4) Of St. Joseph: St. Joseph knew by the angel's message that his wife's child was virginally conceived, that Mary had conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that her child was the Messiah. It would go contrary to all religious psychology for Joseph to do anything except respect Mary's virginity once he was aware of the extraordinary event that had occurred.

Virginity in Comparison with Some Other Privileges of Mary

Theological reasoning finds guidance in the harmony that exists between revealed mysteries. By comparisons with other doctrines we can gain a deeper understanding of the mystery of Mary's perpetual virginity. The basic reason for Mary's perfect virginity as for all her privileges and graces is the divine maternity. Theologians are not agreed as to the nature of the nexus between the dignity of the divine maternity and the prerogative of virginity. The late Father Bover, S.J., presented to the 1948 session of the Spanish Mariological Society a study on the virginity as the key to the mystery of the divine maternity. He saw the language of the Fathers—"virginity generated, brought forth" and "fruitful virginity, virginal fecundity"—not merely as a manner of speech, but as expressing an objective connection between the transcendental virginity and the divine generation.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ J. M. Bover, S.J., *Cómo conciben los Santos Padres el misterio de la divina maternidad. La virginidad, clave de la maternidad divina*, in *Estudios Marianos* (Asamblea del año 1948), vol. 8 (Madrid), 1949, pp. 185-256; on the nature of the nexus between the virginity and the divine maternity, as well as between virginity and Mary's co-redemptive activity, cf. Lawrence P. Everett, C.S.S.R., *The Nexus between Mary's Co-redemption Role and her Other Prerogatives*, in *Marian Studies*, vol. 2 (1951), pp. 141-142, 146-147.

God intended for Mary a role far larger than merely to be physical Mother of a few children. She was chosen by God to be the Mother of Christ, and to be the spiritual Mother of all mankind, of all those for whom Christ died on the Cross. The Mother of God would also be Mother of all those who received her Son, who believed in His name, "who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (*John* 1, 12-13). Even in her lifetime the Virgin of virgins showed herself "in a special way the all-powerful mother of all those given over and consecrated to the service of God."⁷⁹ As St. Ambrose said: "So great was her grace that she not only enfolded virginity in the safekeeping of her own person but also set the seal of integrity on those she visited."⁸⁰

Mary was the first among those who hear the word of God and keep it. In her virginal fidelity she was Mother of Christ at the Annunciation and at Bethlehem. By the same virginal fidelity she would be involved in the terrible child-bearing of all the redeemed at the dread hour of Calvary, at that "hour" which was Christ's and hers, too.

When we speak of Mary's virginal fidelity it may help our understanding to realize that early Judaeo-Christian writing uses the term "virgin" in the sense of a person or community dedicated to God. "The physical connotations of the word were quite minimized."⁸¹ Jahweh's dealings with Israel in the Old Testament were often compared to the marriage bond. And so St. Paul espoused the community of Corinth (2 *Cor.*

⁷⁹ *Sacra virginitas*, in *A.A.S.*, vol. 46 (1954), p. 188.

⁸⁰ *De institutione virginis*; *P.L.*, 16, 319; quoted in *Sacra virginitas*, *loc. cit.*, p. 188 and note 120. On the dogmatic significance of Mary's virginity *post partum*, see the considerations suggested by Carl Feckes in his article *Die Gottesmatterschaft*, in *Katholische Marienkunde*, 2. Aufl., ed. Paul Sträter, S.J., vol. 2 (Paderborn, 1952), pp. 84 ff.

⁸¹ G. Philips, *Perspectives mariologiques. Marie et l'Église. Essai bibliographique, 1951-1953*, in *Marianum*, vol. 15 (1953), pp. 436-511, especially pp. 454-456; cf. short summary in *Theology Digest*, vol. 2 (1954), p. 168.

11, 2) as a pure virgin to be presented to Christ, to become with Him not one "body" but one "spirit" (1 Cor. 6, 17). The notion of "chastity" in this context signified "fidelity"; heresy and apostasy were considered "adultery."

"In the concrete, the virgin is one who keeps perfect obedience in faith."⁸² In English, too, faith and fidelity are notions so connected that the same word is opposed to both: infidelity. In ancient writings *pistis* and *fides* also contain both ideas. Thus Irenaeus wrote: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by the obedience of Mary. What the virgin Eve bound by her incredulity, the Virgin Mary loosed by her *fides* [faith-fidelity]." ^{82a} "The idea of virginity in early Christian literature certainly includes the notion of corporal integrity, but solely as a sign of the more important spiritual disposition of a total and permanent consecration to God."⁸³

Virginity and Assumption

Recent studies on the Assumption include many discussions on the relationship between Mary's perfect virginity and the Assumption.⁸⁴ For centuries Christian writers have appealed

⁸² *Ibid.*

^{82a} *Adversus haereses*, 3, 22, 4; P.G. 7, 960.

⁸³ *Ibid.* There is a rich field for study in the relationship between the Virgin Mary and the virginal Church; cf. A.-M. Henry, O.P., *Virginité de l'Église, Virginité de Marie*, in *Études Mariales*, vol. 11 (1953), pp. 29-49; C. Sträter, S.J., *Marie, Mère de l'Église*, in *Ephemerides Mariologicae*, vol. 4 (1954), pp. 429-444, esp. pp. 443-444; T. Camelot, O.P., *Les traités "De virginitate" au IV^e siècle*, in *Mystique et continence of Études Carmelitaines*, vol. 31 (1952), pp. 273-292, esp. p. 289.

⁸⁴ B. Capelle, O.S.B., *Théologie de l'Assomption d'après la bulle "Munificentissimus Deus,"* in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, vol. 72 (1950), pp. 1022-1023; C. Balič, O.F.M., *De proclamato Assumptionis dogmate prae theologorum doctrinis et Ecclesiae vita*, in *Antonianum*, vol. 26 (1951), pp. 37-38; Clément Dillenschneider, C.S.S.R., *Le sens de la foi et le progrès dogmatique du mystère marial* (Rome, 1954), pp. 134-136, pp. 160 ff, pp. 224-225; Kilian Healy, O.Carm., *The Assumption among Mary's Privileges*, in *The Thomist*, vol. 14 (1951), pp.

to Our Lady's virginal integrity as indicative of her immunity from the corruption of the tomb. *Munificentissimus Deus* gives quotations from some of the Fathers and theologians showing their mind that the lifeless body of the Virgin Mary did not see corruption. St. John Damascene, comparing the Assumption to Mary's other privileges, wrote: "She who in childbirth had preserved her virginity intact had to preserve her body incorrupt even after death. . . . The bride whom the Father had espoused had to abide in the heavenly bridal chambers. . . ." ⁸⁵ St. Germain of Constantinople is referred to in the same sense: "that Our Lady's body was preserved incorrupt and taken up into heaven was in harmony, not only with her divine maternity, but also with the special sanctity of her same virginal body." ⁸⁶

In the light of the association of the new Eve with the new Adam, the glorification of Mary's virginal body in the Assumption is seen as part of her victory over sin and death. "Immaculate in her conception, a spotless virgin in her divine motherhood, the noble companion of the Divine Redeemer, who won a complete triumph over sin and its consequences, she finally obtained as the crowning glory of her privileges preservation from the corruption of the tomb and, like her Son before her, she conquered death and was raised body and soul to the glory of heaven. . . ." ⁸⁷

When the Fathers of the Vatican Council petitioned the Apostolic See to define the Assumption, they urged the association of the Mother of God in her Son's threefold triumph:

72-92, esp. p. 82; E. Stakemeier, *Das Dogma der Himmelfahrt Mariens* (Paderborn, 1951), pp. 49-51; J. B. Valvekens, *De Tenhemelopneming in verband met het Goddelijk Moederschap en de Maagdelijkheid*, in *Verslagboek der elfde Mariale Dagen*, vol. 11 (1951), pp. 53-70.

⁸⁵ *Munificentissimus Deus*, in *A.A.S.*, vol. 42 (1950), p. 761, from his *Encomium in dormitionem Dei Genitricis semperque Virginis Mariae*, hom. 2, 14.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 768.

"... in the same place [*Gen. 3, 15*] it was foretold that she would be made victress over sin through her Immaculate Conception, over concupiscence through her virginal maternity, and also over death through her accelerated resurrection in the likeness of her Son."⁸⁸ The integrity of Mary's body in her maternity shows the profound sense of her virginity. The equivalent in the body of holiness of soul is incorruptibility, integrity. The full effects of this integrity were not realized until the completion of Mary's course on earth. Yet the bond between her body and eternity, established by the divine maternity, kept her flesh from ever suffering the corruption of the tomb. The integrity conferred by the divine maternity appears both in the virginity and the Assumption. Both are effects of the same cause—one discovers to us the other. Mary's virginity in its concrete reality, such as it was actually brought about by God, gives us a true theological reason for the Assumption.⁸⁹

Mary Perfect Virgin from Her Immaculate Conception

According to Scheeben, the fundamental reason for Mary's perfect virginity, a reason deeper even than her Immaculate Conception and her eminent sanctity, is that Mary's whole nature was made sacred and holy at the moment of her conception by a grace that purified her whole nature.⁹⁰ This is

⁸⁸ Cf. G. Hentrich et R. G. de Moos, *Petitiones de Assumptione corporea B. V. Mariae in caelum definienda*, vol. 1 (Romae, 1942), pp. 97-98.

⁸⁹ Cf. Thomas Philippe, O.P., *Le mystère de l'Assomption. (Étude des raisons théologiques)*, in *Études Mariales*, vol. 8 (1950), pp. 183-207.

⁹⁰ Grateful acknowledgement is made to Kilian J. Healy, O.Carm., for putting at my disposal his unpublished manuscript *The Immaculate Conception and Mary's Perfect Virginity*, a paper delivered at the International Mariological Congress, October 25, 1954, Rome, and to be published in its proceedings; cf. K. Healy, O.Carm., *The Harmony of the Immaculate Conception with Our Lady's Other Privileges*, in *Carmelus*, vol. 1 (1954), pp. 245-249 on the virginity; this section follows Fr. Healy's explanation according to Scheeben. Cf. M. J.

the reason why the flesh of Mary, indeed her whole body, was perfectly subjected to her soul, and her soul subjected to God. Since Mary was destined to be the Mother of God according to His human nature, she was lifted up by the power of God from the rest of creatures to be not only His Mother (in a physical sense alone) but His spouse: *sponsa Christi*.

The Word of God possessed Mary; He possessed her whole being without reserve from the moment of her conception. It is this total consecration to God that demands necessarily an immaculate soul and a virginal body. The body itself belongs entirely and perpetually to God and hence is made holy by Him. Well does St. Germain of Constantinople sing the praises of Mary's bodily integrity: "Thou appearest in beauty, and thy virginal body is all holy, all chaste, the perfect sanctuary of God, so that henceforth it will not know dissolution into dust."⁹¹

Total possession of Mary's nature by God implies that she was created free from sin, full of grace, possessing all virtues, including the virtue of virginity, inclining her nature to remain always the spouse of God alone. Total possession means as well that through her immaculate soul the Word joined to Mary a holy and sacred body that would remain always undefiled, always virginal. The Immaculate Conception and perfect virginity are constituent parts of Mary's total sacredness; they are united in such a way that through her immaculate soul her body received from God its integrity and sacredness.

Conclusion

The coming of Christ was a turning-point in the history of God's dealings with mankind, and of man's response to

Scheeben, *Mariology*, trans. T. L. M. J. Geukers (St. Louis, Mo. and London, 1946) 2 volumes.

⁹¹ *In sanctae Genitricis dormitionem, Sermo 1; P.G.*, 98, 345 ff.

God's mercy. In the new age that began with Christ men were to give themselves in greater numbers to God, even as He was giving Himself. At the head of those who sing the new song to the Lamb stands the Mother of Christ. She is a sign and reminder to mankind of complete surrender of self to God. There is in this no false attitude to marriage, which is in its own way a manifestation of God's glory and a symbol of the union of Christ with His Church. Yet Mary's perpetual virginity, in the Christian sense of exclusive "concern with the Lord's claim" (1 Cor. 7, 32), shows forth undivided dedication to God, and is a challenge to human weakness and to human forgetfulness of God. Again the perpetual virginity of the Mother of God is a reminder of the final condition of every man, of the eternal life where our glorified persons will no longer know earthly marriage. Grace is the seed of glory. The grace of Christ will reach its perfection in heaven. The Mother of Christ is a foretype of our future form of life.

The present Holy Father has beautifully illustrated how consecration to Mary sanctifies home life and how vocations to virginity come from holy homes: "It is not to be wondered at if in hearts especially devoted to her, the Queen of Virgins awaken the desire to imitate the perfection of her love for Christ and men." ⁹²

REV. EAMON R. CARROLL, O.CARM.,
Washington, D. C.

⁹² *Depuis le 8 décembre*, radio-message to Belgian National Marian Congress, Brussels, September 5, 1954, in *A.A.S.*, vol. 46 (1954), pp. 540 ff; translation from *The Pope Speaks*, vol. 1 (1954), p. 283.